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ABSTRACT

Mass persuasion involves a message production process which significantly alters or reinforces an attitude, belief, or action of the members of a large, heterogeneous audience. A synthetic communication model for mass persuasion has been constructed which incorporates aspects of several models created to describe the process of effective communication. This model combines Berlo's four major components (source, message, channel, and audience), Schramm's functional distinctions (involving encoder, decoder, and interpreter), Knower's attention to the type of message which may be communicated, and Shannon and Weaver's concept of the noise factor. (Two diagrams accompany the detailed description of the model.) (JM)

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A SYNTHETIC MODEL OF MASS PERSUASION

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There are almost as many definitions of persuasion as textbooks on the subject. Almost every author has attempted to supply his own definition of the phenomenon. Most volumes on mass persuasion either define persuasion only, provide a vague and undistinctive definition of mass persuasion or avoid all pretense of providing a viable definition for either phenomenon. Perhaps the best way to delineate "mass persuasion" is to first explain "persuasion," then to recognize the special characteristics of "persuasion" before a "mass" audience.

A DEFINITION OF MASS PERSUASION

As a working definition of persuasion, we suggest any message-production process which significantly alters or reinforces an attitude, belief or action. Involved with this definition is the assumption of a specific intent on the part of the communicator (persuader) in accordance with Berlo's observation regarding the goal of persuasive communication:

> Our basic purpose in communication is to become an affecting agent, to affect others, our physical environment and ourselves, to become a determining agent, to have a vote in how things are. In short, we communicate to influence--to affect with intent.[1]

What is a mass audience? The term "mass" implies enough auditors that an accurate count would be impractical under most conditions. While some theorists might opt for a definition of "mass" to include only that audience which may be reached through the "mass media" (newspapers, radio, television, film, public campaigns), there are occasions when one speaker might

address an audience larger than the entire audience reached by a "mass media" effort. For example, would a Billy Graham crusade audience of 30,000 "live" auditors be classified as a "mass" audience? It seems that they must be so considered.

It is useful to distinguish "mass" audiences from other groups, especially "interpersonal," "small group" and "organizational" audiences. Hall describes four areas of territoriality which correspond to the above four descriptions, adding a "close" and "far" division to provide a total of eight categories. "Intimate" distance includes distances of three feet to a touching position; "personal" includes a distance up to eight feet between source and receiver; "social" includes distances up to twenty-five feet; "public" distances occur after twenty-five feet. Thus, one factor in mass persuasion is that it usually occurs at a distance of more than twenty-five feet. Hall examines this concept of proxemics furthur, identifying sociopetal distances (which tend to bring people together) and sociofugal distances (which tend to separate people).[2] Mass persuasion has more sociofugal characteristics than sociopetal. The audience, in mass persuasive situations, is more likely to have a preponderance of heterogenous qualities rather than homogenous.

Barnlund discusses "collective communication" as opposed to "interpersonal." In "collective" (mass) communication, large numbers of people are involved so that members of the mass are only vaguely aware of the

unique identities of other auditors. Members of mass audiences, whether crowds or audiences, are phsysically organized to reduce the opportunity for interaction and to promote a co-acting relationship. There is usually a single major source of messages, and everything is geared to focus attention exclusively on cues provided by the source. Except for ritualized responses, communication is predominantly one-way. Communicative roles of the participants are polarized in formal settings, with the vast majority of pe ple confined more or less permanently to interpreting messages and relatively few, often a single person, to initiating them. These cues are highly calculated, organized in advance and presented with minimal extemporizing. Barnlund concludes that:

> The continuous, planned nature of discourse in public settings contrasts sharply with the episodic, implusive and fragmentary character of interpersonal interaction. The impersonality of collective settings, the rigid control of channels, the calculated use of message cues and the restrictions on communicative roles contribute to a highly structured social situation in which there is the expectation of unidirectional influence.[3]

Characteristics of the literature relevant to mass persuasion indicates that what can be communicated to large numbers of people is limited to their potential comprehensibilities and susceptibilities.

Effective persuasion thus produces a desired action or attitude. The goal of persuasion is to cause people to act in a desired manner or to think in a certain way. To be considered effective, persuasion must accomplish what it was intended to do. The goal may be a physical act, such as the production of an action, or it may simply create in auditors a pre-disposition to act in a certain manner when the occasion arises.

Thus, effective persuasion must cause either directly or indirectly a desired response. It seems that some people are easier to persuade than others; that an individual may be more or less easily persuaded according to the source and the message--channel, other audience and changing socio-cultural "atmospheres." Experimental studies indicate part of the scope of these phenomena.

Mass persuasion, then, involves a large number of auditors which cannot accurately be determined, a specific intent on the part of the source or message formulator, a heterogenous audience, use of a common channel or similar channels to reach auditors and feedback which is either delayed or non-existent and employs a channel other than that used to convey the original message.

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS IN MASS PERSUASION

Several communicologists have attempted to describe the process of communication through constructing models to explain the conditions under which effective communication occurs. Unfortunately, fewer works have been geared toward persuasion and almost none toward mass persuasion. The ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, observed that a man cannot step into the same stream twice, for conditions are constantly in flux. This statement, with all its implications, provides a good point of departure.

Aristotle's model included three things necessary for oral communication: (1) the person who speaks; (2) the speech he produces; and (3) the person who listens.[4] Berlo's model extends the Aristolian model

to four major components--source, message, channel and audience. The Schramm model provides an explanation of the functions of source and receiver as encoder, decoder and interpreter. Encoding is the process of placing a thought into symbols which can be transmitted; interpreting is the process of drawing the thought from the total knowledge, personality and experience of the source or receiver; decoding is the process of breaking down a received message (or received feedback) from its code into a thought for the interpreter to analyze. Within the source, the interpreter develops an idea from the total knowledge, personality and experience of the source; the encoder places this idea into symbolic code to be transmitted; the message is sent via a channel to the decoder of the receiver; where the message is changed into a thought, concept or idea; the interpreter of the receiver then analyzes the thought as received and decoded, and the encoder of the receiver -- acting upon information from the interpreter -- supplies and encodes a feedback response. This feedback is received by the decoder of the source, changed to a thought-concept and sent to the source's interpreter. There the feedback, as received and decoded, is available to affect future communications. One danger in over-emphasizing Schramm's models is the unreliability of compartmentalizing processes into "steps" which are overlapping; but Schramm enriches Berlo's ideas in recognizing finer distinctions in the communication process and providing a more comprehensive view of how the process actually works. The Shannon-Weaver model introduces the concept of noise to describe those conditions which distract from the linear progression of the message. Knower's model

allows for feedback in recognizing a variety of messages may be communicated. Knower's model includes admonitions that any model should be: (1) realistic; (2) systematic and revised as needed; (3) of practical significance; (4) economical; and (5) multi-disciplinary.[5] Communication is shaped by the culture of the society in which it occurs: all communication has a message which must be fairly and accurately represented through appropriate channels. Similarly, feedback requires a channel for transmission. This feedback is less likely to occur in mass situations; when it does occur, it will be less influential than in interpersonal situations. Feedback in the mass situation usually requires a channel different than that used for the original message; in a very real sense, it becomes a "second" and delayed message. A viewer of a television program, for example, might use a telephone or letter to respond. Schramm allows for direct feedback in describing a circular response model of stimulus-feedback-stimulus. Feedback is described by Westley and Maclean as: person A abstracts from available objects of orientations (reference group) x^1 ... those features he wishes to codify and transmit to person B whose sensory field may or may not include similar objects of orientation. These abstracted and communicated characteristics cause response in B which provide A with feedback regarding his own communicative behavior.[6]

Probably, the most adequate communication model for mass persuasion would be a combination of Berlo's with Schramm's finer functional distinctions, with Knower's more comprehensive attention to the type of message which may be communicated, plus the noise construct of Shannon and Weaver. These have been incorporated into a Synthetic Model of Mass Persuasion.

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(See Figure 1, page)

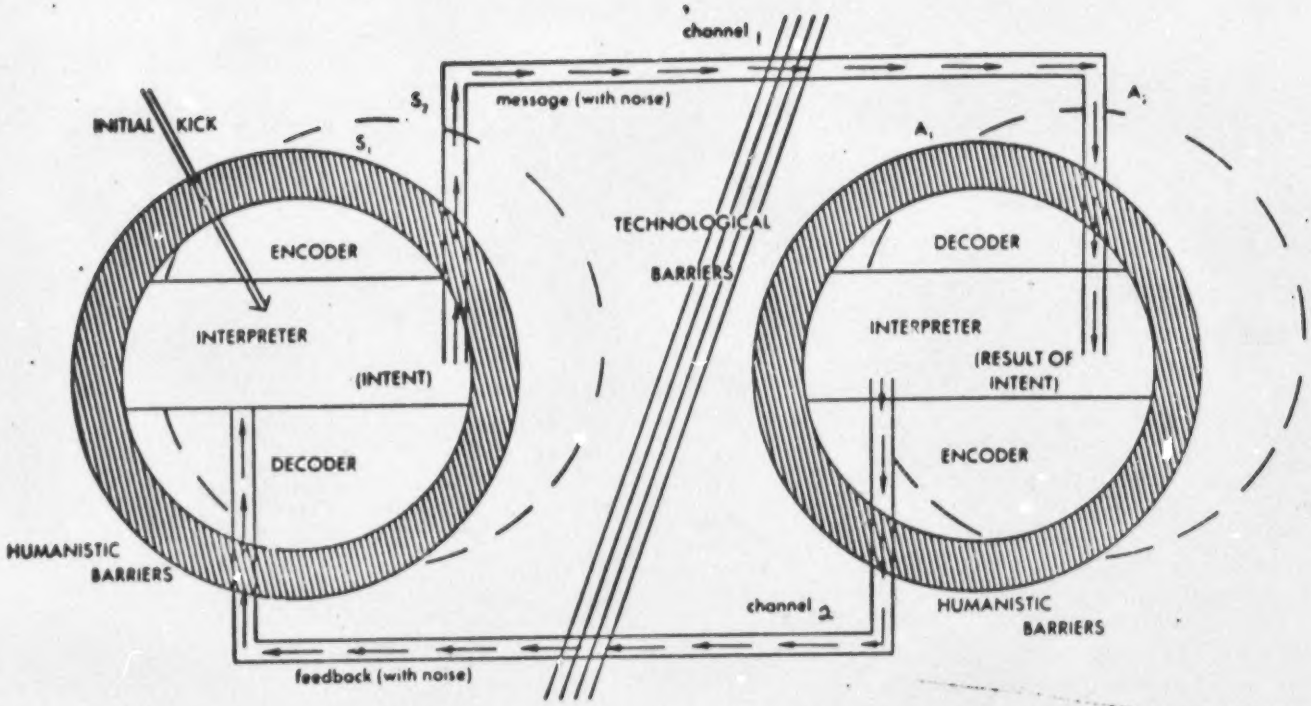
The model of the mass persuasion process presented here is a synthetic view. Berlo and Shannon-Weaver used linear relationships to describe the progression of a message from source through channel to receiver. The option of the synthetic concept is to suggest that channel and message emanate from the source together -- they inter-relate, and each may modify the other until the message is assimilated within the interpreter of the receiver. With his pioneer work in cybernetics, Wiener found the operation of all autonomous systems requires a circular rather than linear response. The synthetic model thus is more realistic in describing the phenomena of mass persuasion than previous models.

Source is operationally defined as the creator of a message, the message formulator. The source may be one person or more, or an organization. Within the synthetic model, sources 1 and 2 may be the same individual(s) or group, or two different individuals or groups. The source may be an individual at one point in the mass persuasion process, and a group at another. The elements of encoder, interpreter and decoder for source and receiver alike are modeled after Schramm and utilize his descriptions. Of the five verbal communication skills, Berlo specifies that two are encoding skills -- writing and speaking; two are decoding skills -- reading and listening. The fifth is crucial to encoding and decoding alike -- reasoning. Thought is essential not only to encoding, it is involved within the process of persuasive communication itself.

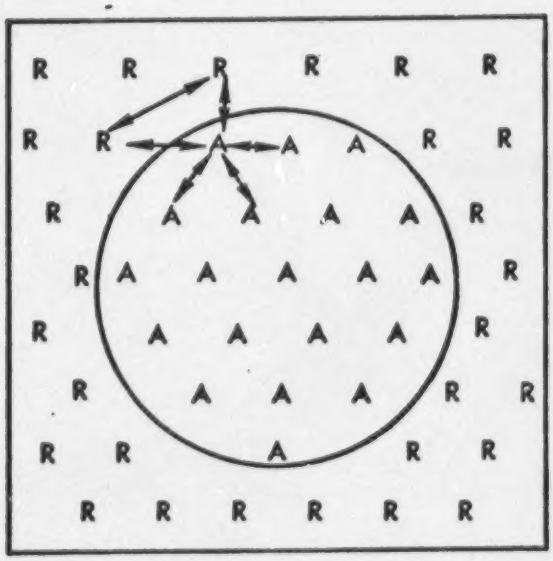
Message is the persuasive act, the transmitted idea with intent from the source to the receiver. The message may be affected at any point by mechanistic and/or humanistic noise or barriers produced by source and/or receiver and/or outside entities. During the period between the interpreter of the source and the interpreter of the receiver, message, channel and noise constantly interact. Any aspect may be modified, altered, reinforced or re-directed by either source or receiver. Messages can exist only in some channel, but the choice of channels often is a factor in effectiveness and fidelity of the message. Berlo warns that "the response we want from a receiver must be rewarding to him or it will not be learned."[7] A stimulus is "anything that a person can receive through one of his senses," while a response is "anything that the individual does as a result of perceiving the stimulus."[8] Berlo concludes that "the only time a stimulus-response relationship is altered is when the organism interprets the existing relationship as less rewarding than a possible alternative relationship."[9]

Channel is the vehicle through which the message is conveyed from source to audience and/or receiver. The channel includes the humanistic, mechanistic and technological instrumentation used in conveying the message. Feedback is diagrammed within its own channel(s). Berlo indicates we choose a channel through various considerations:

> Selection (of the channel) is limited by (a) what is available, (b) how much money can be spent, and (c) what the source's preferences are. Other determinants of channel selection are (a) which channels are received by the most people (at the lowest cost), (b) which channels have the most impact, (c) which channels are most adaptable to the kind of purpose which the source has and (d) which channels are most adaptable to the content of the message.[10]



A SYNTHETIC MODEL OF MASS PERSUASION
(Figure 1)



The Audience in Mass Persuasion
(Figure 2)

Technological barriers act as refractors which may diminish, distort or even prevent message fidelity. Message fidelity affects the ability to say something when we utter sound and the ability to encode messages. Communication breakdowns may be attributed to one or both of two possible causes: inefficienty or misperception. Ferullo observes that the attitudes of the source will affect his ability to influence the human behavior of others.[11] In other words, a speaker with better communication skills has a better chance of communicating effectively. Berlo notes that "noise and fidelity are two sides of the same coin." Eliminating noise increases fidelity; the production of noise reduces fidelity. Some of the literature in communication talks about noise, some about fidelity. The same problem is being discussed, regardless of label.[12] There are at least four kinds of factors within the source (or receiver) which can increase or diminish fidelity; communication skills, attitudes, knowledge and socio-cultural position. As source-encoders, communication skills affect communication in two ways; first, they affect the ability to analyze self-purpose and intentions; second, they affect ability to encode messages which are intended. The words one commands and the way they are placed together affect what we think about, how we think and whether we think at all.

The elements of the synthetic model include the subconstituents of the Berlo model (source includes communication skills, attitudes, knowledge, social systems and culture; message includes elements, structure, content, treatment and code; channel includes the five senses of seeing, hearing,

touching, smelling and tasting; receiver includes the same elements as source). In addition, the source for the synthetic model includes source intent, mechanistic and humanistic barriers (noise), source and receiver include interpersonal mores and folkways; message includes noise as an element within it and the channel alike; message includes message fidelity considerations; channel includes whatever electronic and print facilities are employed. Initial kick is the force which impels the source to develop and originate a persuasive message. This initial kick may be an interrelated sequence of events and phenomena or a "final straw" influence. When the source(s) significantly alter the message during the mass persuasion process, that change becomes the initial kick for a new mass persuasion effort. Minor changes during the transmission of message and/or feedback which do not significantly alter or modify the message are part of the process itself. The major constituent of the synthetic model, which is presented in previous models, is the technological barriers which refract, distort, reinforce or modify the message/channel and feedback/channel. Noise includes all mechanistic and humanistic considerations and general technological barriers and limitations.

Audience or auditors refers to all receivers of the persuasive message. The "primary audience" includes only those members of the audience who are intended recipients of the persuasive message. Within the Synthetic Model for Mass Persuasion, A^1 refers to one specific auditor at a given moment in time; A^2 refers to the same auditor at a subsequent moment in time. For simplicity, only one member of the primary audience is represented in

the synthetic model. Interaction between individual auditors as illustrated in Figure 2. The categories of primary audience and secondary audience are determined by the source and the source's intent. Actually, message-noise-channel and feedback-noise-channel [figure one] operate to and from each member of the primary audience. The number of members in the primary (intended) audience, as indicated earlier in the operational definitions of mass persuasion, cannot accurately be determined. Instead, the source may specify the characteristics of the receivers he seeks to persuade. "Secondary audience" refers to those auditors (receivers) who perceive all or part of the message, but are not among the primary (intended) audience. As with the intended audience, the specific number of the secondary auditors usually cannot accurately be determined.

As represented in Figure 2, one specific member of the primary audience (A) may interact with several other members of the primary audience (As); each member of the secondary audience may interact with several other members of the secondary audience (Rs). The arrows within Figure 2 indicate two phenomena: (1) the interpersonal communication between any two members of the primary and/or secondary audience occurs in a similar fashion to the mass persuasion process as a whole with a few notable exceptions; (a) generally technological barriers are either absent or minimal, (b) initial kick and the processes of encoding, interpreting and decoding are not as formal or as detailed as within the mass persuasion process, and (c) feedback is more frequent and more immediate. The second major difference is that reductions between two primary/secondary auditors may travel both ways with minimal feedback; in other words, the process of interpersonal communication is far less complicated than that of mass persuasion.

[1]David K. Berlo, The Process of Communication (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), pp. 11-12.

[2]Edward T. Hall, The Silent Language (Garden City, N.Y. Doubleday, 1959).

[3]Dean Barnlund, Interpersonal Communication: Survey and Studies (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1968).

[4]Lane Cooper (trans.), The Rhetoric of Aristotle (New York: 1932), p. 87.

[5]Franklin Knower, Personal interview with the author, July 29, 1968.

[6]Bruce Westley and Malcolm Maclean, Jr., "A Conceptual Model for Communication Research," Journalism Quarterly, XXXIV (1957), pp. 31-38.

[7]Berlo, p. 95.

[8]Berlo, pp. 74-75.

[9]Berlo, p. 96.

[10]Berlo, p. 65.

[11]Carl Hovland, et. al., Communication and Persuasion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), ch. 8.

[12]Berlo, pp. 40-41.